

Reaching Across the Years

A group of Vietnam veterans in Columbus, Ohio, is sharing their experiences to help today's returning veterans transition back to civilian life



*The man whose letter started it all:
Mac McGowan at home.*

I've been there and I know what you're going through. That's the message retired Army Capt. Mac McGowan, a patient at the Chalmers P. Wylie VA Outpatient Clinic in Columbus, Ohio, wanted to convey to his young neighbor who had just returned from the war in Iraq.

Though humbly professing to be "not very good with words," the accomplished writer and retired social worker wrote a letter to the young soldier, thanking him for his service and letting him know he had someone he could talk to. Someone who knew what war really looks like, sounds like and feels like years after the final bullets have been shot.

McGowan was an airborne infantryman in Vietnam. He survived the Tet Offensive and countless other battles that didn't earn names or places in the history books. He was wounded and decorated for valor, but his memories aren't always heroic; most, in fact, are tragic.

The simple message McGowan first intended only for his neighbor became much more after he read the letter to his fellow veteran volunteers at the clinic. A match was struck.

That small flame became a fire, forging a team of VA staff, veteran volunteers and local community members who call their efforts "Operation Welcome Home Warrior." The initiative officially kicked off on April 29 as part of the Columbus VA outpatient clinic's annual volunteer services awards luncheon, but by then the work the team does with returning veterans from the global war on terrorism had been underway for nearly six months.

In the beginning

According to Al Burzynski, public affairs officer at the Columbus clinic, Welcome Home Warrior grew from grassroots issues and friendships to the dedicated volunteer team that operates today. As a new public affairs officer in the VA system, Burzynski wanted to learn more about PTSD because it had been such a hot topic in the media. At the same time, he'd been getting to know the veteran volunteers at the clinic. One of his new friends, Lloyd Davis, a Vietnam veteran who helped start the team, brought McGowan and his letter to Burzynski's attention. He was struck by the message.

"After reading that wonderful letter, I asked McGowan, Davis and their cohorts from the PTSD support group if they would be willing to speak publicly about PTSD to the media, the clinic's stakeholders, city officials and at public meetings," said Burzynski.

Of course, Burzynski had to speak with McGowan's PTSD group leader, Dr. Terry Carlson, about the support group members doing interviews, but through a series of meetings about ground rules and procedures, McGowan's entire support group became interested in sharing their experiences coping with PTSD and making the transition back home after serving their country.

But their interest wasn't so much in talking to the media. They wanted to go directly to the soldiers. Those who would be returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with the disorder were their primary concern.

Rather than being discouraged, Burzynski saw an opportunity in the different focus of the group and decided to make their testimonies an integral part of his presentations to returning troops. Soon, members of the team were with Burzynski at every event he attended.

Operation in action

When Dan Law returned from combat duty in Vietnam, his then-girlfriend lived out on a country road. Picking her up at night was an ordeal for him.

"In Vietnam, ambushes were sprung when the foliage was right out to the edge of the road," explained Law, now a member of the Welcome Home Warrior team. "I can remember her panicking because in the dark of night I cut my lights and was going about 60 miles an hour. She asked me, 'What are you doing?' and I replied, 'I'm surviving, what's the matter with you?'"

Decades later, a former Marine who had been out of Iraq for more than a year was having similar problems relating to his wife and mother.

"He was acting different, hard, which wasn't the laid-back man we knew," said Sandra Nading, the Marine's mother. Nading wanted to help her son, but when she tried to talk with him, he would get edgy and anxious. He often insisted he was fine, that nothing was wrong. Nading grew more concerned. During a visit to the Columbus clinic for her son's ankle injury, Nading met Burzynski, who told her about the Welcome Home Warrior project.

Burzynski suggested that Nading bring her son in for a friendly chat after his medical appointment. While Nading went to get her son, Burzynski invited one of the members of the Welcome Home Warrior group, Chuck Kalb, to come talk with the former Marine. Kalb was eager to meet the young man.

"My son and I were sitting in Al's office when Chuck walked in the door and said, 'You know, I want to thank you for what you did for your country.' He said thank you, but it was more than that," Nading said. "At that moment I could see something had lifted off my son's chest. In just a short talk, Chuck really pulled a lot of stuff out of my son that he didn't even realize he was holding back."

It's the warrior aspect of Welcome Home Warrior that Burzynski believes gives the operation its high level of success. Returning veterans are greeted by older, yet somehow familiar, faces. They attest that eyes that have seen battle can instantly connect across generations to form a bond and an instant level of trust far beyond what briefings and benefits display booths can achieve.

"VA certainly has wonderful programs and it is the place to go and get help," Law said. "But VA is also a giant system and it can be very intimidating when you first come to it. In the benefit and health care structure, veterans can get the feeling that they are

just another number. We provide a face, but more importantly, a story. Our stories will connect with their stories and let them know they have found someone to get them through.”

The other veteran volunteers on the team share Law’s dedication. The group has already been to several Ohio National Guard and Reserve drills, as well as family readiness group functions, and they are reaching out to active duty members and their families in Ohio through the U.S. Army Columbus Recruiting Battalion’s Family Support Group and community relations programs to offer their services. They have visited troops on return trips and at every stop, they give their contact numbers freely to new soldiers and encourage the troops to call them anytime. The group’s Web site, www.welcomehomewarrior.org, features a listing of the team members and their contact information.

“Operation Welcome Home Warrior is like a red carpet for us when we get back,” said former Army Ranger Eric Allen, one of the veterans helped by the program. “Having someone who knows what I’ve been through because he’s been there too makes the difference. I’ve fought in Desert Storm and Somalia, but not until I returned from OIF did I encounter something this kind to veterans.”

The team’s approach is meant to bring a new dimension to the seamless transition concept, putting a friendly face with familiar experiences at the forefront of the VA experience for a new veteran, according to Burzynski.

“It’s less intrusive in appearance to have these guys speaking than to have a VA guy simply give a benefits briefing when these soldiers come home,” Burzynski said. “If I go up there during an in-brief for returning soldiers and I try to talk about VA, I can always see a little apprehension. But when the words are coming from volunteers who want to be there and are there on their own time to share their stories and show they care, it makes that returning veteran’s transition a little bit easier. Having that connection shows them that not only will the VA care for them as an institution, but they will have a whole group of real people they can turn to who will welcome them into the brotherhood of veterans.”

The Welcome Home Warrior idea has already shown some of its merit as the volunteer group continues to grow and the positive responses keep bringing new soldiers in.

Burzynski and the team members say it’s the personalized attention that makes the difference to the returning troops. Welcome Home Warrior works like a mentoring program. New veterans partner up with a team member and learn how to navigate the rigors of combat stress and make the transition back to civilian life.

“We deal with the soldiers on a one-on-one basis,” former Army Green Beret Jim Garvey said. “We get their information and we try to find someone on our team that is a perfect fit for them to partner up with. Obviously, I would make a great companion for a Special Forces soldier or a heavy combatant, but I might not be able to relate as well to a medic as one of our other guys can.”

In fact, Garvey shares a special relationship with Allen, who he has taken under his wing. The two combat veterans from different eras periodically meet and speak on the phone.

Warrior wisdom

The team's veterans hail from all four service branches and a variety of backgrounds, ranging from medics to explosive ordnance disposal technicians. Each has a story to share and listening ear to spare.

"This is good for the troops and it is good for us. We definitely get the feeling that we have some wisdom to pass on to these young people," McGowan said. "We've been in combat. We've been where they are and we have been home longer than they have. We can kind of take them by the hand and lead them down the trails that we've been on, make sure they don't step on the same booby traps we had to trip through going through this."

The "warrior wisdom" the team hopes to pass on to the new generation of returning troops is all about keeping hope, and just as in war, it relies heavily on the battle buddy system. Troops are encouraged to keep in touch with their fellow returning soldiers, not be afraid to discuss events that happened overseas, and seek VA counseling and care. Above all, the troops are encouraged to be careful how they react around their families.

"Whenever I'm milling with the GIs, I ask them if they notice anything different about the way their families react to them," said Davis, team member and former Army sergeant. "It's almost always a yes. I tell them it's not really the people [around them] that have changed; it's the soldier that is not the same. You look at things a lot differently than before you went overseas and got into a combat zone. That really hits home with a lot of troops."

The team is quick to stress they are not trying to pass themselves off as the sole source of help. They tell troops they are not counselors and are not attempting to position themselves as counselors.

"We are not trying to pose as an alternative to VA counsel, but to bring troops into the VA and let them know there is help here," McGowan said. "We get the troops comfortable in the VA setting. When they feel comfortable enough, we point them in the right direction for services."

Burzynski knows what a difference the team is making. He sees examples of it all the time, and he admires what they're doing. "It takes a lot of courage to stand up in front of a bunch of people and share your life story, especially when you are dealing with this kind of condition," Burzynski said of the team. "They make this program really work."

Spreading the word

Burzynski and the team don't want their successes in seamless transition to be limited to Columbus. They'd like to see Operation Welcome Home Warrior efforts get started at all VA medical centers.

"There was no difficulty in getting this together, and the benefits for VA and these veterans has been amazing," Burzynski said. "We had people that wanted to do it; they were people of action and we got this done. A lot of people ask if there isn't something already like this out there. The answer, to my knowledge, is no."

The volunteer veterans of the team are willing to help other facilities start their own teams. "I think every vet that I have talked to has been willing to do something like this," said Frank Kearney, team member and former Army staff sergeant. "When I got out of the Army it was thank you very much, go figure it out on your own and that was how it

was for most of us. We don't want that to happen now and we can prevent it from happening."

The team's mission has resonated just as clearly with those who have already seen the operation's benefits.

"PTSD is a real syndrome and a real threat because we bring it back to our families, workplaces and communities, and they suffer," said Allen. "The guys in Welcome Home Warrior give me bearing and help me mold my character back to the old Eric that I want to be. They give me assurance that I'm not the only one and there is help, hope, and with faith, I can come out of this. I can be progressive and positive again. I believe that now and I owe it to them."

Burzynski believes the success of the Columbus program sends a powerful message to VA employees, too. "We all share the same mission. That mission is taking care of America's heroes, and whatever we can do to assist in that mission is our basic duty," he said. "Groups like Operation Welcome Home Warrior really help make that mission possible at the personal level."

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